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Author(s): L. P. Jackson
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# VIRGINIA NEGRO SOLDIERS AND SEAMEN IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

To wage war against the British in the American Revolution, the State of Virginia furnished four military units —the continental line, for service in the continental army, the State line, the State militia, and the State navy. Negroes, slave and free, fought in each of these branches with perhaps the largest number serving in the navy. Some of them volunteered, some were drafted; others served as substitutes for their masters.

Naturally the military rank of the Virginia Negro in the Revolution was that of a private, although in the navy

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a number served as able seamen, rather than ordinary seamen. There were also in the navy a few pilots, drummers, boatswain's mates, and a gunner's mate. In the army several Negroes distinguished themselves as spies. Manual laborers were numerous in the army and navy, and their services were valuable; but this article confines itself to combatants only.

In several Northern States Negro troops were organized in separate regiments, but in Virginia, because of relatively smaller numbers, they fought side by side with the white soldier. The mixing of whites and Negroes was especially common in the navy of the State. Virginia Negro troops fought in many of the major battles of the Revolution—Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, Charleston, Savannah, Camden, and finally at Yorktown in their home State. The term of service corresponded to that of all other per-

The Archives of Cities and Counties, Clerks' Offices
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sons. Some fought through the entire period; others served for a few months only.

There were some instances of slaves giving their allegiance to the British. During a short interval in 1775-1776, for example, several hundred Negro slaves fought with the British and Tories in the vicinity of Norfolk under the command of Lord Dunmore, the dethroned governor of Virginia, following his emancipation proclamation. Since Dunmore's expedition failed dismally and inasmuch as his proclamation had no permanent effect in liberating his black regiment, this whole event and other minor episodes lose historical interest when compared with the victory the Negro soldiers and seamen helped to achieve in the American cause.

The naval establishment of the continental government embraced not only the well known continental navy but also

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eleven state navies. In the Virginia navy there were approximately forty vessels—ships, brigs, brigantines, sloops, galleys, armed pilot boats, and barges—each of which was mounted with ten or more guns. The crews fluctuated in number; sometimes there were less than twenty-five, at other times there were more than a hundred. Negroes fought on many of these vessels, where they ranged in number from one to ten persons on each vessel. Since one of the main purposes of the Virginia navy was to defend the exposed coast line of the State, nearly all the sailors were drawn from the counties lying on Chesapeake Bay and the rivers flowing into this body of water.

## THE PROBLEM OF ENLISTMENT

Although Negroes, slave and free, fought in the Revolution, the continental military authorities at the beginning of the struggle issued instructions forbidding their enlist-

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ment. The several orders given by George Washington and other commanders to the recruiting officers during 1775 illustrate the general policy. In November of this year Washington commanded that "Neither Negroes, boys unable to bear arms, nor old men unfit to endure the fatigues of the campaign are to be enlisted."[1] In another order to recruiting officers later he said: "You are not to enlist any but freemen, able of body and under the age of fifty."[2] With greater emphasis on a policy of exclusion General Gates ordered recruiting officers not to enlist "any stroller, Negro, or vagabond."[3]

The Virginia government pursued a similar policy, especially with reference to the slaves. Observing that several bondmen had deserted their masters under the pretense of being free men and had enlisted as soldiers, the General Assembly in 1777 enacted that "no recruiting officer shall enlist any Negro or mulatto until such Negro shall produce a certificate from a justice of the peace that he is a free man."[4]

This provision appears to afford the entrance of free Negroes into the armed forces without limitations, but this group was still hampered as the tradition of non-military duties for free Negro members in the colonial militia still prevailed. Beginning as early as 1705, free Negroes and mulattoes became subject to enrollment in the militia; but, unlike white persons, they were required to muster for service without bringing arms. Each of the several acts passed by the colonial assembly between 1723 and 1757 provided that they were to enroll for service as drummers, fifers, trumpeters, or pioneers, but not as regular soldiers.[5]

[1] George H. Moore, *Employment of Negroes in the American Army of the Revolution* (New York, 1862), p. 7.

[2] *Virginia Gazette,* January 3, 1777.

[3] Frank Moore, *Diary of the American Revolution from Newspapers and Original Documents* (New York, 1856), I, p. 110.

[4] W. W. Hening, *Statutes at Large of Virginia* (Richmond, 1819-1820), Vol. IX, p. 280.

[5] *Ibid.,* Vol. V, p. 17; VI, p. 533; VII, p. 95.

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The rank of pioneer gave them a special place as laborers and menial servants. A slight reversal in this general policy took place, however, in 1775 when actual warfare came to Virginia. Whereas previously free Negroes could not enroll as armed soldiers, the Virginia Convention in this year provided that "all male persons, hired servants and apprentices above the age of sixteen and under fifty" should be enlisted in the militia.[5b]

The enlistment of free Negroes in the armed forces was nevertheless impaired by the operation of the system of apprenticeship. Under this system free Negro males were legally bound to service to a master until they reached the age of thirty-one. Many free Negro males were thus bound. Because of the guarantee of continuous service in the apprenticeship contract, masters in some cases objected to recruiting officers' impressing their servants. The military authorities were confronted with this problem in the colonial wars and also in the Revolution.[6]

Among the free Negroes of Virginia seized by recruiting officers, notwithstanding their apprenticeship obligations, were Jesse Kelly of Prince William County, the servant of Lewis Lee, and Benjamin Payne of Buckingham County. Lewis Lee valued Kelly's labor so highly that he sued the two recruiting officers for having drawn his servant Kelly into service. For a period of nine years this suit remained in court, and at the end the plaintiff Lee was awarded damages to the extent of thirty-five pounds and six shillings.[7] In the case of Payne no suit was entered by his

[5b] *Proceedings of Convention of Delegates for the Counties and Corporations of the Colony of Virginia*, 1775, p. 36.

[6] Conflicts between masters of servants and recruiting officers were frequent in Maryland during the colonial wars and probably in the Revolution. Cf. E. I. McCormac, *White Servitude in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1904), Chap. VII.

[7] Virginia State Library, Legislative Petitions (MSS), Prince William County, Oct. 26, 1791. Shortly after paying this fine the two officers, John Crittenden and Luke Cannon, petitioned the State legislature to reimburse them.

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master; instead he advised Payne to escape from service and return to him, but when this free Negro actually deserted he was seized by a party of pursuing soldiers and placed again in the ranks.[8] In still another instance a master and a mistress in Cumberland County complained to the commanding officer of the militia that the enlistment of their three bound servants was illegal because, by accident of birth, they claimed these servants were slaves.[9]

In spite of prohibitory statutes and distinctions based on race, the military history of the United States shows that in the wars of this country Negroes have been eventually accepted into the armed forces. Facing possible defeat in the Revolution by the British, the American patriot commanders permitted the enlistment of Negroes, just as the Federal Government in the Civil War of 1861-1865 changed its policy to enlisting Negroes in the face of possible defeat by the Confederacy. Not only did free Negroes of Virginia and other states freely enlist in the Revolution, a certain number of bondmen likewise participated.

Throughout the country slaves served the cause of American independence (1) as runaways, (2) as enrollees expecting liberation at the end of the war, (3) as substitutes for their masters, and (4) as persons owned or hired by the Government.[10] Slaves in Virginia enrolled as soldiers and sailors in each of these positions. However, since this State passed no act during the Revolution permitting the arming of slaves, they either passed as freemen or they participated as slaves in plain violation of the law.

Virginia bondmen fought in the Revolution, although the military authorities held to the policy of exclusion as long as possible. So opposed at one time was the military establishment to enlisting slaves that on one occasion a

[8] Virginia State Library, Executive Papers, Nov. 22-Dec. 21, 1781.

[9] *Ibid.*, May 6, 1782.

[10] Cf. M. T. Mellon, *Early American View on Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1934), p. 65.

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court martial in Goochland County dismissed one Colonel Parrish from the service for having "enlisted a slave as a substitute for his division of militia . . . knowing him to be so."[11]

It is apparent that despite this incident the practice of masters sending their slaves into the ranks as substitutes for themselves was fairly common, for at the close of the war the General Assembly passed an act to provide for the freedom of such slaves. Declaring that these persons had contributed to the cause of liberty and independence by their fighting and that "contrary to principles of justice and to their own solemn promise" many owners had returned their slaves to a state of servitude, the law making body enacted that every slave who had been enlisted by his owner in any regiment as a substitute "shall after the passage of this act be fully and completely emancipated, and shall be held and deemed free in as full measure as if they were specifically named by this act."[12]

Among the slaveholders who sent their slaves into service as substitutes, and perhaps with the promise of freedom, were Lawrence Baker of Isle of Wight County and William Hinton of Lancaster County. Baker was called for service in the militia; but instead of entering this branch of the service himself, he enrolled his slave David in another branch of the service, the navy, where he fought on the vessel called the *Patriot.* The slaveholder Baker thereby relieved himself "from the performance of a tour of militia duty."[13] William Hinton enlisted in the navy on board the

[11] Legislative Petitions, Goochland County, March 19, 1781; Executive Papers, May 11, 1781. In this case the Negro testified to the court that he was a free man and that his name was William Jackson.

[12] Hening, *op. cit.*, XI, pp. 308-309. The execution of this act was assigned to the attorney general who was required to commence an action in forma pauperis in behalf of such slaves who were still being held in bondage by their owners. Since an unlawful detention could be made to this officer only by the slave himself or by some friendly person, it is doubtful if many slaves, ex-soldiers, received the liberty provided for by this law.

[13] *Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1794, p. 44.

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ship *Dragon* in 1777 to serve for a period of five years. After serving only one year he was permitted to leave because of bad health, but only after pledging to furnish a substitute for his unexpired term. The substitute he furnished was his slave Lewis Hinton who participated in actual fighting on the *Dragon* for three years, or until the close of the war.[14]

One example of a slave running away to fight in the Revolution is furnished by the slave Toby. After having run away from his master in 1773, five years later Toby entered the service of his country as a soldier in the fourteenth Virginia regiment. Enrolling himself under the fictitious name of William Ferguson, Toby served until legally discharged at the end of the war.[15]

For a time Virginia might reasonably pursue a policy of excluding Negroes, for after 1776 this state was spared from British invasion for a period of three years. This period of relief came to an end in 1779 when the scene of warfare was shifted by the British from the North to the South. At this critical juncture Virginia was called upon not only to send troops and supplies to the Southern army, but also to defend the State against the successive invasions of the British commanders Leslie, Phillips, Benedict Arnold, Tarleton, and finally Cornwallis. Tidewater Virginia in particular was thrown into a panic by raids which came chiefly from the British headquarters at Portsmouth.[16]

During the enthusiasm of the early part of the war the Virginia regiments were filled without difficulty, but in later years they were filled only with great effort. Volunteers satisfied the early demand; in the later years recruits

[14] United States Archives, "Pension Claims Papers."

[15] Legislative Petitions, 2034-c, Oct. 22, 1789. Despite the fact that Toby ran away from his master, James Wimbish, and was not discovered by him until 1785, the master emancipated Toby, alias William Ferguson, at a considerable financial loss to himself. About this same time Toby married a white woman by whom he had several children.

[16] Henry A. Muhlenburg, *The Life of General Peter Muhlenburg of the Revolutionary Army* (Philadelphia, 1849), chap. vi.

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could be secured only by drafting. Under these conditions Negroes would logically be accepted in the various calls for troops in the critical period from 1779 to 1781. In one of these calls made by Thomas Jefferson, then governor of Viriginia, forty-five counties were "required to send [to various centers] every man whom they could arm immediately."[17]

Depleted ranks characterized the navy as well as the army and the militia. Several calls for seamen were made in 1779 and 1780, and each successive call offered additional bounties and pensions as an inducement. In the call of October, 1780, naval officers were instructed to impress not only all available seamen in the eastern counties, but also half of all the male orphans in this section.[18] The lack of success in the Virginia navy as in the continental navy was caused, then, not by lack of armament, naval stores, and provisions, but by a constant deficiency in sailors.[19]

Facing these adverse conditions, especially during the last two years, the formerly snobbish commanding officers willingly enlisted not only free Negroes but slaves as well. One additional cause for modifying the traditional opposition to slaves participating in warfare was the fact that throughout the Revolution, British commanders sought to entice the blacks to fight against their masters by issuing emancipation proclamations or by the promise of freedom. The remedy, then, for preventing slaves and free Negroes

[17] McIlwaine, H. R. (Ed.), *Letters of the Governors of Virginia.* (Richmond, 1926), Vol. II, pp. 516-17.

[18] Hening, *op. cit.*, Vol. X, p. 385.

[19] Paullin, Charles O., *The Navy of the American Revolution* (Cleveland, 1906), pp. 144-145.

Maryland, like Virginia, had laws excluding or limiting the services of free Negroes; but in 1780, when a draft was authorized to secure one thousand additional soldiers for three years' service, this State sanctioned the arming not only of free Negroes but slaves as well. In the following year the legislature of Maryland resolved to raise immediately 750 Negroes to be incorporated with the other troops (Wright, *Free Negro in Maryland.* New York, 1921) p. 125; Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

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from fighting with the British was to allow them to fight for the cause of American independence.

At the time of the Revolution there were not more than one thousand free Negro males of military age in Virginia. This was the group who had the least restrictions placed on their enlistment, although some of this number were handicapped for service because they were "bound out" as apprentices and were therefore not considered strictly free men. The exact number of Virginia Negroes who fought in the Revolution cannot be determined, but there is reason to believe that five hundred free Negroes participated in this event along with a smaller number of slaves. The following table presents the names of one hundred and fifty of whom approximately one hundred twenty-five are free Negroes and twenty-five are slaves. Their line of service was about equally divided between soldiers and seamen.[20]

| *Name* | *County* | *Service* |
|---|---|---|
| Abram | ——— | Seaman |
| Ailstock, Absalom | Princess Anne | Seaman |
| Alvis, ——— | York | Seaman |
| Anderson, Nathaniel | Princess Anne | Seaman |
| Arbado, Francis | ——— | Seaman |
| Armstrong, Adam | Henrico | Soldier |

[20] A fairly complete list of the names of Virginians who fought in the Revolution is found in three registers: H. J. Eckenrode, *List of the Revolutionary Soldiers of Virginia* (Richmond, 1912), John H. Gwathmey, *Historical Register of Virginians in the Revolution* (Richmond, 1938), and Robert A. Stewart, *The History of Virginia's Navy of the Revolution* (Richmond, 1938).

Practically all of the one hundred fifty Negroes enumerated above are found in one of these registers, but only about one-fifth of them are labeled as persons of the Negro race. This deficiency is remedied somewhat by the reference to race in the military bounty warrants, legislative petitions, tax books (land and personal), and acts of the assembly in the State archives. Other references to race are made in the registers of free Negroes and mulattoes and the order books in the local archives. Still another aid in distinguishing Negro from white soldiers is by checking the long lists of names in the census report *Heads of Families, First Census of the United States. Records of State Enumerations: 1782 to 1785,* and a list of tax payers not enumerated in this census report in Augusta B. Fothergill, *Virginia Tax Payers,* 1782-87.

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Artis, Burwell | Southampton | Soldier |
| Backus | ——— | Seaman |
| Baine, P. Humphrey | Henrico | Soldier |
| Baker, David | Isle of Wight | Seaman |
| Baker, Thomas (Indian) | Northampton | Seaman |
| Barnett, David | Albemarle | Soldier |
| Battle, Shadrack | Albemarle | Soldier |
| Beasley, Larkin | Spotsylvania | Soldier |
| Becket, George | Accomac | Soldier |
| Beverly, Sylvester | Franklin | Soldier |
| Boston | ——— | Seaman |
| Boush, William | ——— | Seaman |
| Bowles, Stephen | Albemarle | Soldier |
| Bowser, James | Nansemond | Soldier |
| Boyd, Augustin | Northumberland | Seaman |
| Brandon, Thomas | Mecklenburg | Soldier |
| Brown, Abram | Charles City | Soldier |
| Brown, Freeman | Charles City | Soldier |
| Brown, Isaac | Charles City | Soldier |
| Bundy, Francis | Culpeper | Soldier |
| Bundy, William | Culpeper | Soldier |
| Carter, Francis | Northampton | Seaman |
| Carter, James | Northampton | Soldier |
| Causey, James | Northumberland | Seaman |
| Charles | ——— | Seaman |
| Chavis, Anthony | Mecklenburg | Soldier |
| Chavis, John | Mecklenburg | Soldier |
| Chris | ——— | Seaman |
| Collins, Mason | King & William | Soldier |
| Cowigg, John | Goochland | Soldier |
| Cuffee | Elizabeth City | Seaman |
| Cuffy | Norfolk | Seaman |
| Cumbo, Daniel | James City | Soldier |
| Cumbo, John | Charles City | Soldier |
| Cumbo, Michael | Charles City | Soldier |
| Cumbo, Stephen | James City | Soldier |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Daniel | ——— | Seaman |
| Davenport, Stephen | York | Soldier |
| Day, George | Northumberland | Seaman |
| Debrix, John | James City | Soldier |
| Driver, John | Gloucester | Seaman |
| Emanuel | ——— | Seaman |
| Evans, Thomas | Lunenburg | Soldier |
| Flora, William | Norfolk | Soldier |
| Frank | ——— | Seaman |
| George | ——— | Seaman |
| George, Samuel | James City | Seaman |
| Goff, Moses | Cumberland | Soldier |
| Going, Sherwood | Albemarle | Soldier |
| Going, William | Halifax | Soldier |
| Gowing, Raverly | Charles City | Soldier |
| Hackett, Peter | Campbell | Soldier |
| Harris, James | Charles City | Soldier |
| Hartless, Peter | Amherst | Soldier |
| Hathcock, John | Southampton | Soldier |
| Haws, Peter | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Haws, William | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Hearn, Ephraim | Gloucester | Soldier |
| Hinton, Lewis | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Holmes, William | King William | Soldier |
| Hopson, John | York | Soldier |
| Hughes, Luke | King George | Soldier |
| Hunt, Goodwyn | Greensville | Soldier |
| Hunt, Hardy | Southampton | Soldier |
| Jack | ——— | Seaman |
| James | ——— | Seaman |
| Jones, Briton | Greensville | Soldier |
| Jones, William | Spotsylvania | Seaman |
| Kelly, Jesse | Prince William | Soldier |
| Knight, Jack | ——— | Seaman |
| LaFayette, James | New Kent | Spy |
| Lewis, Ambrose | Spotsylvania | Seaman |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Loney, Daniel | Hanover | Soldier |
| Lucus, James | King George | Seaman |
| Lucus, John | King George | Seaman |
| McCoy, James | Westmoreland | Soldier |
| McCoy, George | Rockbridge | Soldier |
| Marshall, Kingston | ——— | Seaman |
| Matthews, Saul | Norfolk | Spy |
| Minny | ——— | Seaman |
| Monoggon, George | Gloucester | Seaman |
| Morrison, Anthony | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Moses, Ezekiel | Northampton | Seaman |
| Nickens, Amos | Northumberland | Seaman |
| Nickens, Edward | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Nickens, Hezekiah | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Nickens, James | Lancaster | Soldier |
| Nickens, John | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Nickens, Nathaniel | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Nickens, Richard | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Nickens, Robert | Lancaster | Soldier |
| Nickens, William | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Oats, William | Northumberland | Seaman |
| Payne, Benjamin | Buckingham | Soldier |
| Perkins, Joshua | Accomac | Seaman |
| Perkins, Nimrod | Accomac | Seaman |
| Peter | ——— | Seaman |
| Peters, James | Culpeper | Seaman |
| Pinn, John | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Pluto | Norfolk | Seaman |
| Pointer, Richard | Greenbrier | Soldier |
| Ranger, Joseph | Elizabeth City | Seaman |
| Redcross, John | York | Soldier |
| Rich, William | Lancaster | Soldier |
| Roberts, Hezekiah | Accomac | Soldier |
| Ross, David | Culpeper | Soldier |
| Rouse, Peter | Bedford | Soldier |
| Scott, Jesse | Petersburg (City) | Soldier |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Scott, William | Petersburg (City) | Soldier |
| Singleton | ——— | Soldier |
| Smith, Johnson | Albemarle | Seaman |
| Sorrell, Edward | Northumberland | Soldier |
| Sorrell, James | Northumberland | Soldier |
| Spriggs, Abel | ——— | Seaman |
| Starlins, "Captain" | ——— | Seaman |
| Stephens, Isaac | Northampton | Seaman |
| Stephens, Simon | Accomac | Soldier |
| Stephens, Stephen | Accomac | Seaman |
| Tanner, Nathan | Bedford | Seaman |
| Tarrant, Caesar | Elizabeth City | Soldier |
| Tate, James | Westmoreland | Seaman |
| Tate, Jesse | Richmond | Soldier |
| Teague, Jacob | Accomac | Seaman |
| Thomas, James | Norfolk | Soldier |
| Thomas, William | Charles City | Seaman |
| Toby | ——— | Soldier |
| Tom | ——— | Soldier |
| Valentine, Edward | Dinwiddie | Seaman |
| Valentine, Isham | Dinwiddie | Soldier |
| Valentine, Luke | Bedford | Soldier |
| Viers, Benjamin | Botetourt | Soldier |
| Wallace, James | James City | Soldier |
| Weaver, Aaron | Northumberland | Seaman |
| Weaver, Elijah | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Weaver, Elisha | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Weaver, Richard | Lancaster | Soldier |
| West, James | Spotsylvania | Seaman |
| Whistler, Sawney | Middlesex | Soldier |
| Will | ——— | Seaman |
| Wood, Charles | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Wood, Jesse | Fluvanna | Soldier |
| Wood, Phillip | Lancaster | Seaman |
| Wood, Thomas | Lancaster | Seaman |

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Although slaves and free Negroes had not been previously considered as persons suitable for military service, their practical experience as laborers was sufficient to meet the simple demands of eighteenth century warfare. Generally speaking, the navy of that day did not consist of vessels constructed for war purposes, nor did it consist of sailors trained for warfare. Instead, this arm of the service depended largely on merchant vessels used in the river and bay navigation together with the crew employed in operating this river craft.

Since Virginia slaves and free Negroes had had abundant experience in navigating the Chesapeake Bay and the inland waters of the State they were well adapted for service on the improvised naval vessels of the Revolution. The employment of slaves on boats had indeed reached such a stage by the time of the Revolution that the Virginia legislature passed an act to limit the number in the merchant service on the rivers of the State below the fall line. In an effort to furnish employment to a larger number of free white seamen this law provided that "not more than one-third of the persons employed in the navigation of any bay or river craft . . . shall consist of slaves."[20b] The exploits of Negro slaves as pilots and the enlistment of a relatively large number of free Negroes as able seamen in the navy is to be explained on the grounds of their previous employment on the water.

Lancaster and Northumberland counties, bordering on the Chesapeake Bay and lying between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers, operated as the main breeding ground for the production of Negro seamen. Lying on the east and west bank of the Rappahannock River and preceding northward about seventy miles to the falls of this stream are the counties of Middlesex, Essex, Richmond, Westmoreland, King George, and Spotsylvania. These counties likewise contained many slaves and free Negroes who were employed

[20b] Hening, *op. cit.*, XI, pp. 403-404.

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on the boats of the Rappahannock and the Potomac. A similar condition prevailed in the Eastern Shore counties of Accomac and Northampton, a narrow stretch of territory almost entirely surrounded by water. Elizabeth City and Norfolk counties, at the mouth of the James River and facing the Chesapeake Bay and Hampton Roads, fell in this same general classification.

In this region were located two of the Virginia ship yards and in it cruised the Potomac and Rappahannock fleets of the Virginia navy. To these and other fleets there came from Lancaster County the free Negro Seamen Peter Haws, William Haws, Anthony Morrison, Elijah Weaver, John Weaver, John Pinn, Thomas Wood, Charles Wood, and seven members of the family of Nickens—Hezekiah, James, Richard, Edward, Nathaniel, John, and William. From the adjoining county of Northumberland there came James Sorrell, James Causey, Augustus Boyd, Aaron Weaver and Amos Nickens. From Accomac County on the Eastern Shore there came Nimrod Perkins, Joshua Perkins, Simon Stephens, and Stephen Stephens. From the town of Fredericksburg there came William Jones and Ambrose Lewis, the town where the vessels of the Rappahannock fleet were launched.

Certain slaves also enlisted with these free Negroes in the navy. Among them were Mary Tarrant's Caesar, Lawrence Baker's David, Robert Brough's Pluto, Elenor Boury's Cuffy, Mary C. Graves' Cuffee, William Hinton's Lewis, Charles Thomas' Jack, and two slaves owned or hired by the State of Virginia—Jack Knight and William Boush. Another of these slaves was a full blooded African by the name of Starlins. Altogether at least seventy-two Negroes, slave and free, were drawn into the naval service from sixteen counties in Tidewater, Virginia.

## FIGHTING ON LAND AND SEA

Negro seamen in the navy fought in largest numbers on

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the following vessels: the *Patriot,* the *Liberty,* the *Tempest,* the *Gloucester,* the *Hero,* the *Dragon,* and the *Diligence.* Enrolled on the *Patriot* were Caesar Tarrant, David Baker, Pluto, Jack Knight, "Captain" Starlins, and Cuffee; on the *Liberty* were Charles, James, George, Emanuel, Richard Nickens, William Jones, Samuel George; on the *Gloucester* were Edward, James, and Hezekiah Nickens, Anthony Morrison, Peter and William Haws; on the *Hero* were Pluto, Jack, Bachus, Boston, Will, and George; on the *Dragon* were Nathaniel Nickens, Abel Spriggs, Ambrose Lewis, Thomas Wood, and Lewis Hinton; and on the *Diligence* was Nimrod Perkins. Only six of these persons were slaves, the five on the *Patriot* and Lewis Hinton on the *Dragon.*[21]

Some of these men gave service on more than one vessel. Samuel George, for example, fought on both the *Tempest* and the *Gloucester;* Anthony Morrison fought on the *Hornet* and the *Gloucester;* Richard Nickens on the *Hero* and the *Tempest;* and Joseph Ranger fought on four vessels—the *Hero,* the *Dragon,* the *Jefferson,* and the *Patriot.* At the end of service these seamen were regularly discharged. James Causey, for example, on February 16, 1780, was discharged from service on the *Dragon* "having well and truly served three years . . . the term of his enlistment."[22]

As noted previously, many of the Negroes in the naval service were able seamen rather than ordinary seamen. A few rose to higher ranks. James Thomas served as a boatswain's mate on the *Northampton,* and James Sorrell as a gunner's mate on the *Hero.* Nimrod Perkins was a drummer on board the *Diligence* galley. The Negro members of the State navy also comprised at least four slave pilots: Minny, Cuffee, "Captain" Starlins, and Caesar Tarrant. The last two were very skillful; so skillful that

[21] Virginia State Library, "Officers, Seamen, and Vessels, State Navy" (MS), 1776-1779; "Journals of the Navy Board" (MS), Nov. 4, 1777; "Land Bounty Warrants" (MSS), James Jennings; Robert A. Stewart, *The History of Virginia's Navy of the Revolution* (Richmond, 1933), pp. 188, 236, 247.

[22] "Land Bounty Warrants," James Causey.

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they may be classified among the heroes of the American Revolution.

The navy of Virginia served the general purposes of all navies in time of war. The function of this navy was to capture the many British vessels in the Chesapeake Bay and the waters of Virginia, to prevent the British from making raids on the river plantations for the purpose of carrying off slaves, to maintain communication with the outside world in order that the State might continue its normal import and export trade, to secure supplies for the soldiers on land, and in general to protect the shores of the State since the continental and state regiments of soldiers were frequently drawn to remote parts of the country. The Virginia navy functioned in this capacity until about 1780. By the time of the Yorktown campaign it had been nearly destroyed. The navy which rendered such indispensable service in this last engagement was the continental fleet and the French fleet under DeGrasse. The one or two State vessels remaining at the close of the Revolution continued in operation until 1787.

In the accomplishment of the tasks of the navy the vessels on which the Negroes fought played an active part. The schooner, *Liberty,* for instance, fought in twenty distinct actions; the *Patriot* captured a British vessel, the *Fanny,* laden with stores and supplies for their forces at Boston; the *Tempest* fought the *Arnold* in the James River;[23] and the *Dragon* after staying in the Rappahannock River for one year, proceeded down the river into the bay and around to the Eastern Shore of Maryland cruising about all the time trying to defend the country against British ships.[24]

On one occasion while cruising at sea, the *Dragon* had a fight with the British schooner *Lord Howe* which "outsailed" the Virginia ship "and got away."[25] The *Dragon*

[23] *Southern Literary Messenger,* vols. 24-25 (1857), pp. 135, 211.

[24] "*Land Bounty Warrants,*" James Jennings.

[25] United States Archives, "Pension Claims Papers," Lewis Hinton.

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was built at Fredericksburg and at one time contained more Negro sailors than any other vessel. One of the most daring of its crew was Lewis Hinton, the slave who substituted for his master. He served three years on the *Dragon*.

Because of the hard life on the sea, especially in war time, it is likely that the Negro seamen in the Revolution under various commanders fared about like the Negro seamen in the War of 1812 under Commodore Perry. Under this officer white and colored men messed together and they fraternized in general.[26] All enjoyed together the bounteous supply of rum given by the State—a half pint a day with an extra amount during periods of fighting. One or more tierces were kept on hand for this purpose. Drinking was so regular that the naval authorities supplied a back allowance for any amount they had failed to give. Thus it was that the slave Kingston, one time, was allowed one gallon, a quart and a pint.[27]

The naval board, the governing body of the navy, attempted also to keep the seamen well supplied with clothing. The keeper of the public store, for instance, on one occasion, was ordered by the board to supply Anthony Morrison on the *Gloucester* with one outside jacket, one inside jacket, two shirts, one pair of drawers, two pairs of trousers, two pairs of stockings, one pair of shoes, one hat, and a blanket. Under this order five other Negroes on this vessel were supplied also with the same articles.[28]

On this occasion the board ordered that certain Negro seamen on board the *Hero*—Pluto, Jack, Bachus, Boston, Will, and George—should each be supplied with one jacket, two pairs of stockings, one and a half yards of coarse linen, one pair of shoes, and a sufficient amount of coarse cloth to make each of them a pair of trousers.[29] For a thirty-day

[26] George Livermore, *An Historical Research Respecting the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, as Citizens and as Soldiers* (Boston, 1863), p. 159, (Appendix A).

[27] "Papers Concerning the State Navy," Vol. 1.

[28] "Journals of Navy Board," Nov. 4, 1777.

[29] *Ibid.*

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period, two years later, the crew of one hundred four officers and seamen on the ship *Dragon* were given an ample supply of pork, flour and spirits. Sharing in these provisions on the *Dragon* at this time were five Negroes: Jesse Tate, Lewis Hinton, William Haws, Joseph Ranger, and Thomas Wood.[30]

Some of the Negro seamen were killed or wounded in action. Cuffee, the slave pilot, died from injuries received in service;[31] Aaron Weaver received two dangerous wounds in an engagement at the mouth of the York River;[32] and Joseph Ranger was with the *Jefferson* when it was blown up by the enemy on the James River.[33] Ranger was taken prisoner with the rest of his crew shortly before Cornwallis' surrender. Against this record of bravery and valor exhibited by these seamen, certain other Negro seamen have a record of desertion from the Virginia navy. Francis Arbado, "a black Frenchman," deserted the *Manley;* Abel Spriggs and Thomas Wood, mulattoes, deserted the *Dragon.*[34] A reward of sixty dollars was offered to any person who would place Spriggs and Wood in jail or deliver them on board any vessel belonging to the State navy.

Some of the Negro seamen made distinguished records and were rewarded in ways to be later shown in this article. "Captain" Starlins, a slave and a full blooded African, who was trained as a pilot from his youth, showed unusual bravery on the *Patriot* when he led the crew in an attack on a British sloop in the James River. In the midst of this fight Starlins "hollered for joy" at the moment when he thought he had captured the British sloop. His vessel went down in defeat, however, because of the sudden appearance of fifty British sailors on the scene. This African was held

[30] "Papers Covering the State Navy," Vol. 1.

[31] Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

[32] Acts of the Assembly, 1812, chap. CXXXVI, p. 139.

[33] Clerk's Office, Elizabeth City County, *Court Records,* 1825-1832, p. 360.

[34] *Virginia Gazette,* May 16, 1777; July 3, 1779.

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in high esteem by all the Virginia naval officers, especially Commodore James Barron.[35]

Caesar Tarrant was a pilot for four years and engaged in several sea fights with the British. His chief engagement took place south of the Virginia capes while serving on the *Patriot.* He steered this vessel during the whole action and "behaved gallantly."[36] Fighting with Tarrant on the *Patriot* was Pluto, the slave of Robert Brough. He likewise displayed valor in several actions on board this armed vessel.[37]

Among Negro seamen in the Virginia navy the greatest number of years of service was given by Joseph Ranger of Elizabeth City County. He enlisted in 1776 and continued in service until the State disposed of its last vessel in 1787. Ranger entered the service from Northumberland County, the home of six or more other Negro Virginia navy seamen. He served first on the *Hero* about three months, and was afterwards transferred to the *Dragon* for a period of four years. After this vessel was converted into a fire ship, Ranger was transferred to the *Jefferson* for a year, or, as previously noted, until it was blown up by the enemy on James River. His final vessel for service during the war period was the *Patriot* on which he performed duty about six months until the battle of Yorktown. Ranger was serving on the *Patriot* when he was taken prisoner with the rest of crew shortly before Cornwallis' surrender.[38]

Since the Virginia fleet was practically destroyed by the British, this State later obtained permission from Congress to keep two armed vessels at its own expense. These vessels were the *Liberty* and the *Patriot.* Ranger served on both of these ships until the final discontinuation of this remnant of the Virginia navy six years after the close of the war.[39]

[35] *Virginia Historical Register,* Vol. 1, (1848) pp. 129-131.

[36] R. A. Stewart, *op. cit.,* p. 255.

[37] Journal of House of Delegates, Oct. 1793, p. 43.

[38] Clerk's Office, Elizabeth City County, *Court Records,* 1825-1832, p. 360; "Land Bounty Warrants," Joseph Ranger.

[39] Virginia State Library, "Auditors Papers, State Boats," 173, 174.

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During the course of the Revolution the State of Virginia contributed heavily to the continental army under Washington by the organization of fifteen regiments of soldiers. As members of the continental army the soldiers of these Virginia regiments of course fought in all the major battles of the war. Enlisted in some and perhaps all of these regiments were Virginia Negroes. For example, Peter Rouse of Bedford County was enlisted in the first Virginia regiment, Thomas Evans of Lunenburg and James Carter of Northampton County were enlisted in the second, John Chavis of Mecklenburg was in the third, Shadrack Battle of Albemarle County was in the tenth, Toby, alias William Ferguson, was in the fourteenth, and William Flora of the town of Portsmouth was enlisted in the sixteenth.

Some of the Virginia Negro soldiers participated in many battles and incurred all the hardships of warfare. Shadrack Battle served three years and fought in the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, and Savannah;[40] Sylvester Beverly served throughout the war and fought in such engagements as Monmouth, Stony Point, Paulus Hook, Guilford Court House, and Yorktown.[41] Anthony Chavis not only served under Washington at Brandywine and Yorktown, but also under LaFayette and General Greene in the Southern theater.[42] William Flora likewise fought throughout the war in many battles, and attained particular distinction in the battle of Great Bridge near his home in Norfolk County, Virginia.[43] Though entering the war in its closing stages, John Hathcock and Hardy Hunt, Southampton County Negroes, participated in several engagements in Virginia and in the Southern states.[44]

In a class with these soldiers for honorable service was James Carter. This man first gave eighteen months garri-

[40] "Land Bounty Warrants," Shadrack Battle.
[41] *Journals and Documents, Virginia House of Delegates,* 1822-23, p. 102.
[42] "Land Bounty Warrants," Anthony Chavis.
[43] *Ibid.,* William Flora.
[44] Legislative Petitions, Southampton County, Oct. 9, 1792; Nov. 19, 1795.

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son service in his native county, Northampton, and afterwards enlisted with the second Virginia regiment in the town of Portsmouth. From this point the part of his regiment to which he belonged was ordered South to the aid of South Carolina then under invasion by the British. Carter marched with his regiment through Virginia and North Carolina to South Carolina. Fighting with the patriot army in the battles connected with the British invasion of the South, including Camden under General Gates, Carter returned to Virginia with the regiment of which he was a member, and fought in the closing battle of Yorktown.[45]

In all probability Sylvester Beverly and Shadrack Battle were only two of a much larger number of Virginia Negroes in the battle of Monmouth and other Northern engagements. In the battle of Monmouth there were about fifteen thousand troops in the American army, and more than seven hundred of these, according to Bancroft, were black men.[46] That Virginia Negroes were well represented in this and other engagements in Pennsylvania and New Jersey during 1777 and 1778 is shown by the fact that the brigade commanded by Woodford at this time had a total of forty Negroes, and the brigade commanded by Muhlenburg contained ninety-eight Negroes.[47] These Virginia brigadier generals commanded chiefly Virginia troops including these Negroes.

The soldiers of color were sometimes discriminated against by their officers. Thus one Virginia Negro soldier, Thomas Evans, was prevented from fighting in the battle of Monmouth even though he was regularly enlisted. Evans was allowed to march with his regiment within two miles of Monmouth when Colonel Brent of this regiment ordered him not to fight but to remain behind and take care of his baggage. Again a year later when the regiment of Evans

[45] Clerk's Office, Northampton County, *Order Book* (MS), 1831-36, p. 125.

[46] George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, X (Boston, 1874), p. 133.

[47] Washington Manuscripts, Library of Congress, cited in the *Journal of Negro History*, 1, p. 127.

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reached the neighborhood of Stony Point preparatory to battle this officer gave him similar orders. Evans served the second Virginia regiment for three years, but as a victim to race prejudice "he was in no battle."[48]

Certain Virginia Negro soldiers distinguished themselves for bravery. In this class fell Richard Pointer, a slave of Greenbrier County, Saul Matthews, a slave of Norfolk County, James Lafayette, a slave of New Kent County, and William Flora, the free Negro of Portsmouth.

During the Revolutionary period western Virginia was constantly subject to attack by the Indians. One of these attacks came in Greenbrier County in May, 1778, on an occasion when a company of people had gathered at the house of Colonel Donnelly, the master of Pointer, to defend themselves against one of these expected onslaughts. At the moment when a large body of the invading Indians reached Donnelly's house, they were met on the outside by Pointer alone and held at bay by him long enough for the company inside to arm themselves and defeat this attempt of the Indians to slaughter the entire party.[49]

Saul served the patriot cause in the double capacity of a soldier in the American army and a spy for American commanders in the British army. He served his master and a number of officers at intervals throughout the war. This slave of Thomas Matthews "shouldered his musket" and went over to the American side in the early months of the war at the time when many slaves of Norfolk and Princess Anne counties were following the British in response to the proclamation of Dunmore.

At times Saul as a spy was able to get very valuable information for American commanders. On one occasion in 1781 during the campaign of the British in the vicinity of Portsmouth this year, Saul, at the risk of his life, was sent into the British garrison by Colonel Parker on the usual

[48] Legislative Petitions, Lunenburg County, Dec. 23, 1819.
[49] *Ibid.*, Greenbrier County, Nov. 12, 1795.

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mission of securing information of value to the American forces. He brought back military secrets of such value to Colonel Parker that on the same night, serving as a guide, he led a party of Americans to the British garrison, who successfully carried off the picket.[50] On another occasion in 1781, when Saul's master and many other Virginians had fled into the adjoining State of North Carolina, he was sent by them to Norfolk to secure similar intelligence concerning the movement and plans of the British troops.

For his services as a spy and a soldier such distinguished army officers as Baron Von Steuben, LaFayette, Peter Muhlenburg, and General Nathaniel Greene praised him to the highest. Josiah Parker, colonel of the Virginia militia in 1781, said that he deserved the applause of his country.[51]

While Saul was serving Colonel Parker and other officers as a spy during the invasion of the British at Portsmouth, Virginia, James LaFayette was performing a similar valuable service for the Marquis de LaFayette during the invasion of the British over much of the entire State. This larger invasion was under the command of Cornwallis. James LaFayette first bore the name of James Armistead because he was the slave of William Armistead, but after the Revolution he became known by all as James LaFayette because of his constant service to this noted commander. "Often at the peril of his life" this slave frequented the British camp and thereby "kept open a channel of the most useful information to the army of the State." In all of his daring missions to the British camp this spy performed his task with "cheerfulness and fidelity."[52]

In crossing the bridge south of Norfolk, known as the Great Bridge, on December 9, 1775, a detachment of the small army of Dunmore was met with a volley of gun fire

[50] *Ibid.*, Norfolk County, Oct. 9, 1792.

[51] Executive Papers (unclassified).

[52] Legislative Petitions, New Kent County, Nov. 30, 1786.

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from a group of sentinels in Woodford's second Virginia regiment. One of these sentinels was William Flora. This free Negro's distinction on this occasion arose out of the fact that he kept firing at the attacking British when all his comrades had retired to their breastworks. In the midst of a shower of musket balls from the British, Flora fought them alone. By this act and similar acts Flora earned the respect of his officers and the members of his several regiments generally.

Thirty years or more after the battle of Great Bridge, William Flora again rose to the defense of his country. The war alarm this time was sounded by the attack of the *Leopard* on the *Chesapeake* off the coast of Norfolk, the preliminary event to the War of 1812. For his fighting weapon, strange to say, Flora brought with him the same musket he had used at the battle of the Great Bridge. The old veteran seemed as ready to fight the British on this occasion as he was in the opening days of the Revolution. His actual service this time, however, only involved his enlistment on one of the gun boats as a marine under Commodore Decatur. In common with all the recruits in this emergency he remained in this service for only a short period of time.[53]

## REWARD FOR SERVICE

For this service to the cause of American independence the Negro soldiers and seamen of Virginia were liberally rewarded. In common with all recruits the State paid them in money, in land bounties, and granted them pensions, first as an inducement to enlist, and later as a reward for service. In addition to the pensions granted by the State, which commenced shortly after the war, the Virginia veterans benefited also by the several pensions acts passed by Congress about a half century later—in 1818, 1820 and 1832.

The military land reserved by Virginia as a bounty for

[53] *Virginia Historical Register*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (Jan. 1853), pp. 4-6; "Land Bounty Warrants," William Flora.

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her soldiers was first located in western Kentucky, and later in Ohio in the well known Virginia military tract of more than four million acres. The parceling out of this vast tract began at the close of the Revolution and was not completed until 1852. During this long period of time Virginia gave away more land to her veterans than any other State in the union, or even the United States.

The amount of land granted to a veteran varied from one hundred acres for a private to fifteen thousand acres for a major general. Although the bulk of the Virginia Negroes who fought in the Revolution were privates and commanded thereby only one hundred acres, there were at least three persons of this group who received 2,666 2/3 acres, the grant of a subaltern, or a commissioned officer below the rank of captain. Applications for warrants to land were made to the land office at Richmond.

In common with other states Virginia also provided for the manumission of certain individual slaves who fought in the war. Feeling that slavery was contrary to the principles of the Revolution and that certain Negroes who served in the war did so faithfully, the General Assembly liberated the following individuals: James Lafayette, Caesar Tarrant, William Boush and Jack Knight, Saul Mathews, David Baker, Pluto, and Richard Pointer. And there were probably others. These manumissions were executed ten or more years after the struggle.

Each of these slaves applied by petition for his freedom and received it for the following reasons: James Lafayette, for his daring services as a spy to Marquis de LaFayette,[53b] Caesar Tarrant, for piloting the armed vessels of the State,[54] William Boush and Jack Knight for "their faithful service whilst employed on board the armed vessels in public service."[55] Saul Matthews for his campaigning in two armies—in the American army as a soldier and in the

[53b] Legislative Petitions, New Kent County, Nov. 30, 1786.

[54] Hening, *op. cit.*, XIII, p. 102.

[55] *Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1789, p. 7.

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British as a spy,[56] David Baker for serving as a substitute for his master,[57] Pluto for serving as a seaman on one of the armed boats of the State,[58] and Richard Pointer for displaying unusual valor by warding off, all alone, a company of Indians.[59]

Before this particular group of slaves were manumitted certain free Negro seamen were already receiving payments in money from the State. On different occasions during 1785 and 1786, for example, Peter, Will, Abram, Daniel and Tom, ordinary seamen and able seamen, were paid sums varying from three pounds, seven shillings, and six pence to fifteen pounds, nineteen shillings, and six pence.[60] In 1786 Joseph Ranger, the seaman, received one payment of two pounds and ten shillings for one month's service; the next year he received one payment of five pounds and seven shillings for two months and seven days' service.[61] Perhaps the highest paid seamen among the Negroes was James Sorrell, gunner's mate, who served for five years on two or more vessels. On one occasion he was given ninety-one pounds, ten shillings, and ten pence, or the balance of his full pay.[62]

Payment in money for services in the Revolution was insignificant, however, in comparison with the payments by grants of land. Among those who were given warrants to land within a few years after the war were Richard, Edward, and Nathaniel Nickens, the seamen of Lancaster and Northumberland counties. They each received one hundred acres.[63] About the same time Joseph Ranger, benefiting

[56] Legislative Petitions, Norfolk County, Oct. 9, 1792.

[57] *Journal of the House of Delegates*, 1794, p. 44.

[58] Legislative Petitions, Norfolk County, Nov. 22, 1796.

[59] *Ibid.*, Greenbrier County, Nov. 12, 1795.

[60] Virginia State Library, *Revolutionary Soldiers* (MS), Vol. V. pp. 31, 62, 157, 196, 215.

[61] "Auditors Papers, State Boats," 173, 174.

[62] Virginia State Library, "Rejected Claims Papers."

[63] Land Office, Richmond, *Military Certificates* (MS), Vol. 1, pp. 278, 513; "Land Bounty Warrants," 1786.

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again in another way, received a grant of one hundred acres;[64] Sawney Whistler, seaman, then received a grant of two hundred acres.[65] Other veterans received similar amounts at this time or later. In later years William Flora and David Ross, soldiers, each received the usual allotment for privates of one hundred acres;[66] James Carter, a soldier of longer service, received two hundred acres.[67]

After giving warrants to land in the Virginia military tract for a generation after the Revolution to those soldiers and seamen who actually fought in this war, the State then made grants to the heirs of the Revolutionary veterans. Following the general practice, certain Negro sons and daughters pressed their claims for land in the 1830 and 1840 decades.

Mary Stephens applied for land for the three years' services of her father, Stephen Stephens, as a seaman in the state navy;[68] Nancy Tarrant applied for the three years' services of her father, Caesar Tarrant as a pilot in the navy.[69] No less vigilant in seeking land were Elizabeth Nickens and Judy Watkins who made claims for the services of their father, Hezekiah Nickens,[70] and James Nickens, Junior, who made it for the services of his father, James Nickens.[71]

Among other applicants were Sarah Morrison of Lancaster County and Staunton Jones of Fredericksburg. Sarah Morrison stated that she often heard her father, Anthony Morrison, say that he had never received his land, because all the veterans who served with him had either

[64] *Military Certificates*, Vol. 11, p. 242.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 531; "Land Bounty Warrants."

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 392.

[67] Clerk's Office, Northampton County, *Order Book* (MS), Vol. XXIX, p. 125.

[68] *Military Certificates*, Vol. 111, p. 263.

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 418.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 280.

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died or had removed from Lancaster County. He therefore was at a loss to obtain the necessary evidence to establish his claim.[72] Staunton Jones made claims also for his father, William Jones, a seaman.[73] Finally there was Mary Bell who pressed her claims for the services of her father, James Thomas, as a boatswain in the State navy.[74]

Each of these applicants was successful in securing a warrant entitling him or her to land in Ohio. Mary Bell and Nancy Tarrant were the heirs who received the largest grants because of the superior type of service of their parents. Mary Bell received two warrants for 1,333 1/3 acres each and Nancy Tarrant received the same amount in one warrant embracing 2,666 2/3 acres. One other Negro who received this large grant was Nimrod Perkins of Accomac County. He was still living in 1830, so that he received 2,666 2/3 acres himself for his services as a drummer.

Land was generally allotted by the State of Virginia, as just indicated, but since most beneficiaries did not actually settle on their land in Ohio, it is doubtful if this particular group of Negro veterans or heirs ever located in that State. Like hundreds of others they did not choose to start life over again in a strange region. These persons probably followed the common practice of assigning warrants to speculators for a sum as low as ten cents an acre, or like many other veterans who were given land in Ohio they may have lost it simply through the chicanery of lawyers. Falling under one of these classifications, for example, was the case of Nathaniel Nickens who made the following provision concerning his bounty:[75]

I hereby assign all right tittle claime or demands that I have against the commonwealth of Virginia for services as a seaman in the state navy to William Biggers and the auditor of public accounts is

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 262.
[73] *Ibid.*, p. 258.
[74] *Ibid.*, p. 511.
[75] "Land Bounty Warrants," Nathaniel Nickens.

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hereby requested to settle the said claims and to grant certificates with my bounty of land to the said Biggers.

Some of the Revolutionary veterans lived to be seventy, eighty, and ninety years of age. In addition to receiving land bounties, some of these old men found themselves eligible also to receive pensions granted by the United States Government and the Virginia State Government. Among the Virginia Negroes at least twenty-one received pensions under the three acts of Congress, thirteen of whom were benefited by the act of 1832.

The most common allowance for these Virginia soldiers and seamen was ninety-six dollars a year, although several dropped as low as forty dollars. Among the ninety-six dollars a year seamen were Lewis Hinton, Richard Nickens, James Harris, Isaac Brown, Joseph Ranger, Sherwood Going, Shadrack Battle, and Ephriam Hearn. James Carter surpassed these veterans in that he drew a pension of one hundred dollars a year during the last five or ten years of his long life.

The pension act of 1832 extended to all branches of military and naval service. Some of the group of twenty-one Negroes under discussion served in the militia, some in the Virginia continental line, and some in the state and continental navy.

To establish eligibility for these United States pensions the method followed was by deposition in a county or city court. The order books and minute books of the Virginia local courts for the pension years, 1818, 1820, and 1832, are thus filled with the sworn testimony of the veterans of the Revolution or their heirs. Among the depositions known to the present writer are those of William Flora, Nimrod and Joshua Perkins, Simon Stephens and Stephen Stephens, George Becket, Joseph Ranger, James Carter and Lewis Hinton.

Appearing in person before the Norfolk County court on April 21, 1818, at an old age, William Flora declared that

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he was a private in Captain Grimes' company of the fifteenth continental regiment for three years and that he was honorably discharged.[76] Appearing in person before the court of Accomac County on July 31, 1832, at the age of seventy-two, Nimrod Perkins testified that he enlisted as a drummer on board the *Diligence Galley* in 1777, and that he continued on board this vessel until she was laid up in 1781. He was born in Accomac County, was living there when discharged, and in fact never lived elsewhere. He further said that he had previously received a Virginia military land warrant for one hundred acres and scrip for the same for his service. Finally, in order to conform to the requirements of the United States law, he declared that his name was not on the pension roll of any agency in the State of Virginia.[77] This sworn testimony of Nimrod Perkins was apparently correct in that two years earlier when he was applying to the land office at Richmond for his land bounty, one Elcanah Andrews stated that he and Perkins cruised in the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean together in the vessels *Diligence* and *Accomac* and were laid up in the cold winter of 1779-1780 when the Bay was frozen. Andrews further said that Perkins was a free man of color and that of all those who served on these two vessels he and Perkins were the only persons still living in 1830.[78]

About six weeks later in the adjoining county of Northampton on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, James Carter was testifying concerning his record in the Revolutionary War fifty years before. This old soldier related that he enlisted in the army early in the war as a private in a group of eighteen months men, and that he garrisoned a fort in his county for this period of time. At the expiration of eighteen months he crossed the Chesapeake Bay and enlisted at Portsmouth for the war as a private in the twenty-second

[76] Clerk's Office, Norfolk County, *Minute Book*, 15, p. 120.
[77] Clerk's Office, Accomac County, *Order Book* (MS), 1829-32, p. 537.
[78] "Land Bounty Warrants," Elcanah Andrews.

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Virginia State regiment of artillery. He also told the court that he marched with a part of his regiment through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and returned through the Carolinas to take part finally in the battle of Yorktown. Among the engagements in which he fought on this long tour to the South was the battle of Camden under General Gates.[79]

As previously noted, Lewis Hinton was the Negro slave seaman who served as a substitute for his master William Hinton. Giving his testimony two years after the veterans named above, Hinton stated that he took his master's place on the ship *Dragon* in the spring of 1778, and that within three years the *Dragon* and the other Virginia state vessels were all captured by the enemy in James River. "Finding no way of escape," when his vessel sailed up the Chickahominy, a tributary of the James River, Hinton said he left the *Dragon* and went home to Lancaster.

Hinton was too sick to attend the Lancaster court in person in 1834 to give this testimony. Notwithstanding he was placed on the pension roll this same year for ninety-six dollars a year. Although this veteran was not placed on the pension roll until 1832 his payments began as of the year 1831. He was thus paid $288 by the government at one time to bring up this back pay. Hinton remained a United States pensioner for at least ten years. He was still on the roll at the age of eighty-three.[80]

Coinciding with these claims for United States pensions were those claims made for pensions from the State of Virginia. The veterans claiming under the State law, with perhaps one exception, were a distinct group from those seeking the pensions from the Federal Government. Among the veterans seeking relief from the State were Anthony Morrison, Richard Nickens, George McCoy, Aaron Weaver, James LaFayette, William Jones, Sylvester Beverly, and

[79] Clerk's Office, Northampton County, *Order Book*, 39, p. 125.
[80] United States Archives, "Pension Claims Papers."

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Peter Rouse. Under the state pension system one certain sum of money was granted for the present relief of the old soldier or seaman and another sum was granted as an annual allowance. The present relief to these particular individuals varied from thirty dollars to sixty, and the annual pension from forty dollars to sixty.

The State applicants for pensions resorted to the petitions to the legislature, a common method in that day from citizens for considerations of all kinds. The many supporters of Anthony Morrison's petition asserted his right to a pension because as an old man, eighty-six years of age "his shattered and trembling limbs are now tottering." They said he had always been an industrious man, and more deserving than the average of the free Negro group.[81] About this same time Richard Nickens, likewise of Lancaster County, appealed for a pension. His friends stated that he conducted himself "orderly and faithfully" while in the service of his country, and that since he was now (1819) "old and infirm," and in his sixty-ninth year, he should be placed on the pension list and allowed a small sum for his present relief.[82]

Two of these veterans gave the receiving of wounds in battle as special reasons for deserving consideration. George McCoy asserted that in a certain battle he received a severe wound;[83] Aaron Weaver asserted, as previously noted, that in an engagement at the mouth of the York River he received two dangerous wounds.[84] In all probability James LaFayette, the spy for the Marquis de LaFayette, experienced but little difficulty in securing a pension because his services to this commander were so valuable. In 1786 he had petitioned the legislature to emancipate him; now in 1819 he felt that he should also receive a pension. He accordingly applied and was given sixty dollars for his pres-

[81] Legislative Petitions, Lancaster County, Dec. 4, 1821.
[82] *Ibid.*, Dec. 4, 1819.
[83] Acts of the Assembly, 1831, Chap. 130, p. 140.
[84] *Ibid.*, 1812, Chap. CXXXVI, p. 139.

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ent relief and forty dollars annually as a pension.[85]

While individual Negroes were thus notifying the public authorities that they had fought in the Revolution fifty years or more after this event in an effort to secure land or pensions, groups of Negroes and liberal minded whites at the same time were likewise reminding the State legislature and the general public of this same fact. They petitioned the legislature and wrote articles in newspapers and magazines in order to protect the free Negro, win public favor for him, and recognize the contributions of all Negroes to warfare in defense of America.

One of the most significant appeals for justice based on previous participation in warfare came from a group of sixteen free Negroes of Fredericksburg. This intelligent and progressive group petitioned the legislature in 1838 for permission to reopen their school, which had been closed following the act of 1831 denying education to free Negroes. They presented the argument that as free Negroes they were entitled to a school because some of them were descendants of persons who had fought in the Revolution, while others personally had "engaged in aiding the efforts of their country" in the War of 1812.[86] Two of the ancestors in the Revolution to whom they referred were perhaps William Jones and Ambrose Lewis, early free Negro residents of Fredericksburg and seamen in the Virginia navy.

That Negroes fought in the Revolution was also shown by a Richmond newspaper. Shortly after the legislature of Virginia in 1853 made its third and last attempt to compel the free Negroes to leave the State, a correspondent of the *Richmond Enquirer* defended them by saying that this measure was very unjust inasmuch as free Negroes had fought in the Revolution "as long and as hard as white men."[87] Speaking in the same vein a few years later, the

[85] *Ibid.*, 1819, Chap. CLXIX, p. 188.

[86] Legislative Petitions, Spotsylvania County, 1838.

[87] *Richmond Enquirer*, Feb. 24, 1854.

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writer of an historical article on the Virginia navy in the Revolution commented that "amongst the meritorious seamen" were "many faithful blacks who served under the flag of our navy during the whole war."[88]

Aside from having borne worthy military careers in the Revolution, some of the Negro veterans likewise maintained worthy civilian careers in their respective counties and cities after this event. They married legally, followed useful occupations, owned property, provided for their families, and were highly respected by the people of their communities.

Outstanding among these useful veterans was William Flora of the town of Portsmouth. Within a year or two after his return from distinguished service in the army, Flora bought two half lots on King Street in this town at a cost of twenty-two pounds and thirty-five pounds respectively.[89] He thereby became one of the first free Negroes in Virginia to buy town property. Flora operated a livery stable and for more than thirty years enjoyed the patronage of the white citizens of this town. As a part of this business he owned many horses and carriages. Like many other progressive free Negroes of this period in Virginia with slave wives and children, this head of the family manumitted one or more of them. Declaring that he wished to discharge a natural duty and render his daughter, Grace Flora, independent and happy, he accordingly liberated her April 1, 1799.[90] When this man died about 1820 his real estate consisted of two dwelling houses and a lot, which he willed to his son and grandson.[91]

After achieving freedom in 1786 for his services as a pilot, Caesar Tarrant of the town of Hampton likewise

[88] *Southern Literary Messenger*, Vols. XXIV-XXV (1857), p. 17.

[89] Clerk's Office, Norfolk County, *Deed Book*, 28, p. 156; *Ibid.*, 29, p. 246.

[90] *Ibid.*, 28, p. 33.

[91] Clerk's Office, Norfolk County, *Will Book*, 5, p. 21. Flora willed his grandson his lot on Washington Street. In 1828 this heir sold this same lot to the Methodist Church of Portsmouth (*Deed Book*, 54, p. 86).

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made progress as a property owner and a man of influence in his community. During the remaining ten or twelve years of his life following his liberation from slavery, Tarrant bought several pieces of property in Hampton and in 1796 disposed of it by will. To his wife he gave his houses and lot; to his daughter, Nancy, he gave one-half the property after his wife's death; and to his daughter, Lidy, he gave freedom from slavery.[92] Nancy was the daughter who thirty-five years later received the warrant for 2,666 2/3 acres of land in Ohio.

James LaFayette, the faithful spy to Marquis de La-Fayette, rivaled his namesake in longevity of life. When the distinguished Frenchman returned to the United States in 1824 for his well known tour of the country, and when passing through New Kent County, Virginia, he found his Negro ally still alive and active in this county. LaFayette greeted his namesake on this occasion. The black LaFayette was the owner of forty acres of land which he purchased eight years earlier.[93]

In the neighboring county of Charles City there lived the Brown family at least three members of whom fought as soldiers in the Revolution. Abraham, one of these participants, became a property owner in Charles City six years before the Revolution by the purchase of one hundred fifty acres of land for the sum of ninety-six pounds.[94] Freeman and Isaac, the other participants, were likewise property owners at the time of their engagement in the Revolution. In 1782 Freeman owned forty acres and Isaac two hundred and seventy acres.[95]

In 1830 there were twenty-four separate heads of fami-

[92] Virginia State Library, *Will Book,* Elizabeth City County (photostat) 1701-1904, Part 11, p. 517. The original copy of Tarrant's will is on file in the land office at the State Capitol.

[93] Virginia State Library, Tax Books (MS), *Land,* New Kent County, 1816-1824.

[94] Virginia State Library, *Records* (Photostat), Charles City County, p. 155. The Will of Abraham Brown is recorded in *Will Book,* 1789-1808, p. 16.

[95] Virginia State Library, Tax Books, *Land,* Charles City County, 1782.

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lies of the Browns, one of whom, still living, was the veteran and pensioner, Isaac Brown. The Browns of the Revolutionary period and their descendants for many years to come exhibited among themselves strong family ties and a spirit of devotion. A number of them accumulated small tracts of land and later made provision for its distribution among wives, sons, and daughters. By the time of the Revolution the Browns had been free people in Charles City County for two or more generations; by 1860 there had emerged several more generations. By this time they had thus built a family tradition of a stronger character than was possible for most free Negro families of that day.

The role of leadership in school and church which this family assumed after 1865 was exhibited by them even in the days of slavery. Samuel, the grandson of the Revolutionary soldier, Abraham, was a preacher and the pastor of Elam Baptist Church of Charles City. This church was organized in 1810 with the Browns, Cumbos, and Harrises, descendants or relatives of the Revolutionary veterans, serving as its chief promoters. Eight years after the organization of this independent Baptist church of free Negroes (and some slaves), Abram Brown, church clerk, and his wife Susannah, donated a tract of land to this church with Cornelius Brown, John Brown, James Brown, and James C. Harris serving as trustees.[96]

[96]Clerk's Office, Charles City County, *Deed Book*, 6, p. 214. This church has had a continuous existence from the time of organization until the present. Falling heir to the tradition of church leadership, Samuel A. Brown, son of Samuel, the former pastor of Elam, grandson of Abram, the church clerk, and great grandson of Abraham, the Revolutionary soldier, is the present pastor of the Gillfield Baptist Church of Petersburg.

Isaac Brown, the Revolutionary veteran, was a brother or cousin to Abraham Brown. Isaac was placed on the United States pension roll in 1829 at the age of seventy four. By his will made in 1830 this man left his property to his wife, one son, and one daughter (Clerk's Office, Charles City County, *Will Book*, 3, p. 407).

Other Brown wills found in the will books at the clerk's office in Charles City are as follows: Dixon (1811), *Will Book*, 2, p. 471; Milly (1827), 4, p. 80; Abraham (1836), 4, p. 375; Reuben (1839), 4, p. 333; Peter (1841), 4, p. 447; James (1864), 6, p. 214; Jesse (1864), 6, p. 216.

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The Cumbo family of James City, Charles City, and New Kent counties furnished to the Revolution four members: Michael, Stephen, Daniel and John. The Debrix family of these same counties, the Harris family of Charles City, and the Wallace family of James City each furnished at least one member. Each of these free Negro families owned property in the slavery period, some owned even before the Revolution, and they disposed of it by will as did many of the free Negro property holders. Several of the Revolutionary veterans of these families who were living in the 1820-1830 period applied and were placed on the pension roll of the State Government or the United States Government. James Harris, for example, was placed on the United States pension roll in 1820 for an allowance of ninety-six dollars annually.

Perhaps the most celebrated Virginia Negro family for participating in the Revolution was that of Nickens in the counties of Lancaster and Northumberland in the Northern Neck of this State. There were at least nine of them who took up arms in defense of the freedom of the thirteen colonies. A Nickens could be found on a number of vessels in the State navy in the patrol of the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. One of this group, Richard Nickens, became the beneficiary of about all the rewards the Virginia and United States governments had to offer. He received successively the money bounty and land bounty of one hundred acres immediately after the Revolution, he was placed on the state pension roll in 1820, and he was placed finally on the United States pension roll in 1831, at the age of eighty-four.

There were still other Lancaster and Northumberland free Negro families who fully shared in the Revolutionary War. Among these were Boyd, Weaver, Woods, Haws, Oats, Pinn, and Sorrell. During the generation following the Revolution these families also acquired property and exhibited the solidarity characteristic of the families already mentioned.

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The American Revolution is by no means an antiquarian event to present day Virginia Negroes. To the contrary there are at least twenty-five families in the State today who are the descendants of soldiers and seamen in the Revolution. In many instances they still live in the counties where their ancestors lived as free men and answered the call for American independence. The Browns and Cumbos are still in Charles City and James City, the Beckets are still in Accomac, the Battles and Bowles are still in Albemarle, and the Nickens are still in Lancaster. In so far as the families in Tidewater Virginia are concerned, their sense of pride may rest in the participation of their ancestors in the navy of the Revolution rather than the army.

Participation of Negroes in the navy is indeed a branch of military service which is of general interest. Not only were these persons prominent in the navy of Virginia, but in the other state navies and the continental navy as well.[97] One member of a crew on a continental vessel in his early years was James Forten, the well-to-do Philadelphia Negro. He stated that nearly all the war vessels of the Revolution were manned with colored seamen. On the *Royal Louis* of twenty-six guns, for example, there were twenty such persons. A similar large proportion were to be found likewise on the *Alliance,* the *Trumbull,* the *Confederacy,* and other vessels.[98] Having established a naval tradition in the Revolution, Negro seamen were enlisted extensively in the War of 1812. In Perry's fleet at the battle of Lake Erie one sailor out of every ten or twelve was a Negro, and two years later on the *Java,* another vessel under Commodore Perry, one sailor out of every six or eight was a Negro.[99]

L. P. JACKSON

*Virginia State College*

[97] Herbert Aptheker, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (New York, 1940), pp. 27-29.

[98] William C. Nell, *Colored Americans in the Wars of 1776 and 1812* (Philadelphia, 1902), pp. 30-31.

[99] George Livermore, *op. cit.*, p. 159 (Appendix A).

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